Burial customs at Tell Arbid (Syria) in the Middle Bronze Age. Cultural interrelations with the Nile Delta and the Levant

Author(s): Zuzanna Wygnańska

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BURIAL CUSTOMS AT TELL ARBID (SYRIA) IN THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE

CULTURAL INTERRELATIONS WITH THE NILE DELTA AND THE LEVANT[1]

Zuzanna Wygnańska
Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw

Abstract: Eight seasons of excavations on the site of Tell Arbid in the basin of the Khabur River in northeastern Syria (1997–2005) resulted in the discovery of 29 graves of MBA date. An analysis of this set of burials indicated that a new burial rite, characterized by strong family and clan ties, had been introduced about the beginning of the second millennium BC. Parallels for MBA burial practices have been recorded on neighboring sites in the Upper Khabur area and in southern Mesopotamia. Equid burials accompanied some of the human graves and it seems that the custom saw a revival in this period once again after the EBA. Close parallels for this custom as well as other elements of the burial practices at sites in the eastern Nile Delta and in the southern Levant are interesting to note. The spread of similar practices can be linked with high probability to the presence and growing political dominance of the West Semites.

Keywords: burial practices, Middle Bronze Age, equid burials, vaulted chamber tombs, West Semites, kin-oriented burials

Excavations on Tell Arbid, a 38-hectare multi-period site located in northeastern Syria in the very heart of the Upper Khabur basin,[2] have paralleled finds from several other sites on the Upper Khabur, testifying to a change of material culture at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age (MBA). Even as the nature of the transition between the end of the Early Bronze and the beginning of the Middle Bronze remains open to debate, MBA grave assemblages appear to bear out new burial customs resulting from shifts in social organization or even ethnic changes occurring at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. The new customs began as

[1] This paper was delivered during the PCMA symposium "Continuity of traditions and manifestations of mortuary practices" on 21–22 November 2005 and reflects the state of research corresponding to that period.

[2] The Tell Arbid excavation, headed on the Polish side by Prof. Piotr Bieliński of the University of Warsaw, is a joint project of the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw and the General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums of Syria in Damascus, continuing in the field since the summer of 1996. Vestiges of occupation have been dated, with breaks, from the Early Bronze Age to the Hellenistic period. At least three phases of Middle Bronze Age remains have been discovered.

an irregular pattern characterizing the earliest phase (MB I) and evolved into a complex set of mortuary practices in the MB II, which is otherwise designated as the Khabur Ware period. Similar features of mortuary practices have been attested in southern Mesopotamia during the Old Babylonian period. Contemporary parallels for some of the rites can be found in the eastern ("Hyksos") Nile Delta, particularly at Tell el-Daba'a, as well as on some Levantine sites. The Middle Bronze Age funerary practices from Tell Arbid are a springing board for discussing some aspects of cultural interrelations with the Nile Delta and the Levant.

I. MORTUARY PRACTICES ATTESTED ON TELL ARBID DURING THE MBA

The beginning of the MBA on Tell Arbid coincided with changes in settlement character (from urban to rural), pottery repertoire (introduction of painted Khabur Ware) and mortuary practices. A total of 29 graves representing the entire chronological range involved was discovered between 1996 and 2005:[3] at least six graves from the early phase of MBA settlement on Arbid (MB I), 21 from MB II and two most probably from MB II.[4] These graves formed an assemblage that was characterized by the concurrent presence of several aspects of mortuary behavior, which did not occur together at any other time other than in the first half of the 2nd millennium BC. Relevant aspects of mortuary behavior included the presence of intramural burials, six different coexisting tomb types, a modest and standardized set of grave equipment, shifts in burial ground organization, the presence of secondary burials, and evidence for an ancestor cult. An equid burial and puppy interments seem also to fall within this set of mortuary practices.

DESCRIPTION OF BURIAL PRACTICES

In order to analyze the burial practices involved, a brief review is in order.

1. There was a considerable increase in the number of intramural adult burials in the *iuvenis* and *adultus* group compared to previous periods. Burials were encountered wherever excavations reached MB levels. Nonetheless, it does not seem possible that all the inhabitants were buried within the settlement limits. The Tell Arbid population must have been interred somewhere in the vicinity, but so far surveys in the neighborhood of the site have not produced any evidence of an outside cemetery from the second millennium BC.

2. Six tomb types were attested: simple inhumation pit [*Fig. 1a*], cist [*Fig. 1d*], chamber grave covered with bricks wedged vertically between side walls, referred to by the excavators as a "diamond" type covering [*Fig.1e*], vertical shaft burial [*Fig. 1c*], jar burial [*Fig. 1b*] and barrel-vaulted chamber tomb with horizontal dromos in front of the entrance [*Fig. 1f*].

[3] Since then over thirty MBA graves have been found on Tell Arbid, the new data corroborating the principal claims made in this paper.

[4] MB I: 2000–1790 BC, MB II: 1790–1595 BC for Mesopotamia and Syria (Pruß 2004: 16–17).

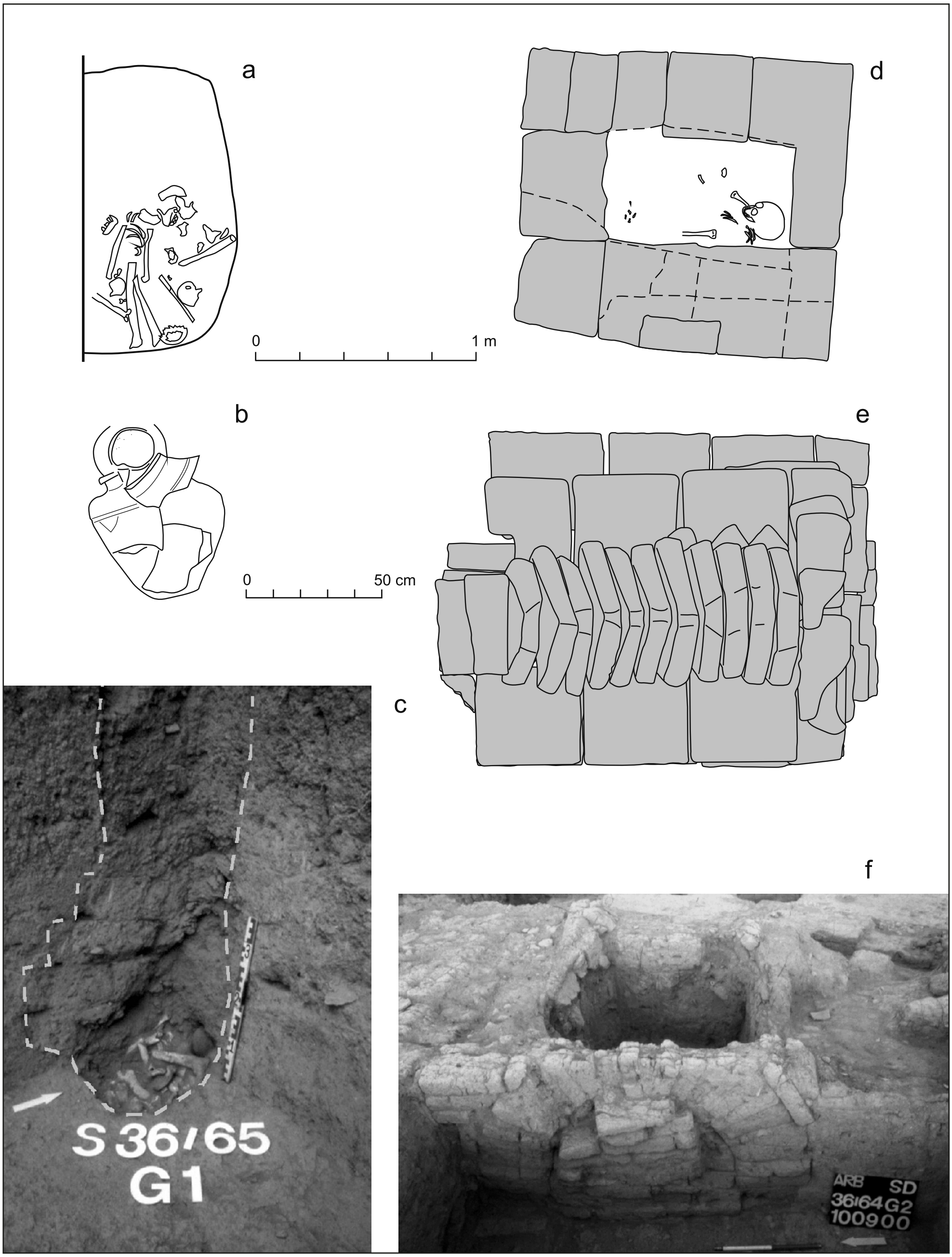


Fig. 1. Tell Arbid. Types of graves (Drawing M. Wagner, photo A. Reiche)

Pits, shaft burials and chambers with a "diamond" type roof appeared already in the MB I. The other grave types (except for the vaulted tomb) had predecessors on the site in different periods. Barrel-vaulted tombs with horizontal grave shafts were introduced in the MB II and their frequent appearance is considered to be a hallmark of the Khabur Ware period on Tell Arbid. For the first time, all these six types were in use contemporaneously during the MB II.

The reason for the diversification of grave types is not clear. Connections between specific grave type and age of the deceased was observed for vaulted tombs, which were reserved for adults, and for jar burials, which were restricted to infants under two years old (actually, this was the only way in which infants were buried). For the remaining types no such explicit association was observed.

It can also be said that male burials prevailed in vaulted tombs of this kind; however, this cannot be taken as a rule.

Another possible explanation beside age differentiation is that grave types requiring a higher expenditure of energy to build reflected the deceased's higher status (Tainter 1978: 116–117, 125; Brown 1981: 36). In other words, a variety of grave types could have reflected different levels of social differentiation.

3. Modest and standardized grave equipment seems to have been the rule [*Fig. 2*]. It consisted of one to several vessels, modest personal ornaments, sometimes a meat offering and a single "beer set".[5] This uniformity is striking compared to the variety of grave types, unless ethnographic data is considered indicating no simple correlation between an individual's wealth and the richness of his or her burial (Ucko 1969). The value and number of items in the grave equipment seems to be independent of age, sex and number of interred individuals. It has been observed, however, that in some cases the frequency of grave goods could vary even within the frame of a single grave type, indicating a certain degree of wealth differentiation in society. Supporting this theory is the observation that more "abundant" equipment also cut across age categories, meaning that it was found not only with adult, but also with child burials, indicating perhaps a measure of the material status of the child's family. It should be emphasized once more, however, that signs of wealth differentiation in the Arbid graves were meager to say the least. Singular objects of prestige and presumably symbolic value, such as a spearhead and so-called "incense burner" [***Fig. 2***], have been found in two graves, as well as auxiliary animal burials of a puppy and an equid (probably an onager, see below) in one grave. These occurred with adult burials and always in vaulted tombs with dromoi. They accompanied the simple, standard set of grave equipment.

4. New and unique organization of burial areas was one of the most striking features of the period, expressed by the trend to bury the dead, children as well as adults and juveniles, *intra muros*.[6] Grave location did not go beyond the limits of the Khabur Ware settlement, although burials were not found exactly under houses or courtyards (as in neighbouring Tell

[5] A burial "beer set" consisted of a bowl with perforated base (see *Fig. 2a*, first vessel from left in upper row), a metal strainer and sometimes a pair of metal tweezers.

[6] The custom of burying infants in the vicinity of houses was practiced throughout Mesopotamia at all times.

Mozan or Tell Barri, for example). Graves excavated between 1996 and 2005 were concentrated in three small graveyards: on the summit of the tell, on the northern slope and on the eastern one. There were also a few graves that seemed unconnected with any of the graveyards at the time of excavation; these however should still be investigated. In each of the graveyards there was at least one chamber tomb with multiple interments; additional burials were interred in the dromos of such tombs. It seems that at least some individual graves were concentrated around a tomb, in the form of "satellite" burials, probably indicating kinship. A separation into distinct burial areas, with graves of varying types and a cross-section of age and sex, was presumably lineage-based and mirrored family membership within a clan (O'Shea 1984: 39–49, 252).

5. Secondary burials of two kinds, successive multiple interments and proper secondary burials, were attested. In the first case, the older remains were pushed aside in the tomb in order to make space for a new interment. In the second one, bones already not in anatomical order were interred; burials of this kind were found in four graves. Ritual decomposition prior to burial should rather be excluded, because such treatment would be in contradiction with what is known about Mesopotamian beliefs in general.[7] One possible explanation is the transport of bones from another location. Perhaps people buried their dead temporarily while on the move, then disinterred the bones and gave them proper burial at a traditional place, such as an

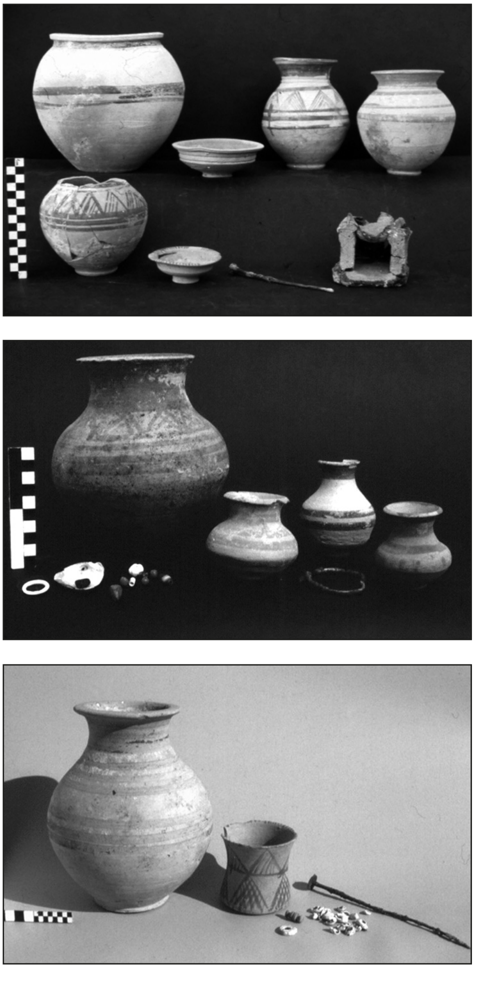


Fig. 2. Tell Arbid. Standard grave goods: top – goods from chamber and dromos fill of a vaulted chamber tomb G2-D-31/42; center – goods from a shaft grave G7-SL-37/55; bottom – goods from a chamber with "diamond" roof G8-SD-36/64 (Photos A. Reiche)

[7] Cuneiform texts indicate the necessity of burying a complete body to ensure untroubled transition into the Netherworld, e.g. one of the versions of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*: George 1999: 188–189; on this subject, see also Scurlock 1995: 1889–1890; Cassin 1982.

ancestral burial ground, after coming back to their family village. Secondary burials were characteristic of the Khabur Ware period, but the practice should not be considered as normative.

6. Traces of post-interment rituals lead to the assumption that society's interaction with the deceased did not end with burial. Ancestor cult was practiced on Tell Arbid, judging by food offerings in the form of animal remains or vessels deposited on different levels in dromos, in front of the entrance to chamber tombs.[8] Not all deceased were honored in this way on Tell Arbid. Post-interment offerings were restricted to the chamber tombs and occurred with multiple burials of two to five individuals, practically always adults,[9] both men and women, but with males being in predominance, as said above.

Tombs with evidence of post-interment offerings may have been the most energy-consuming structures within a particular graveyard, but they were apparently not unique, considering that they occurred more or less contemporaneously in different graveyards on the site. Thus, they cannot be considered elite burials. Their equipment was standard, but included objects of symbolic value, leading to the assumption that the persons thus distinguished had occupied a special position within the family hereditary system, based on genealogy, and that they had become honored ancestors following their death. The practice of commemorating ancestors is confirmed by cuneiform sources of the period (Bayliss 1973). The interpretation is supported also by ethnographic data, indicating an association between chamber tombs with multiple interments and ancestor cult (Bloch, Parry 1982: 32–41; Bloch 1982: 212–213).

EQUID AND PUPPY BURIAL

Equid remains, probably of an onager, and a young dog were found together with one of the multiple chamber burials mentioned above (Piątkowska-Małecka, Wygnańska 2006). The equid was interred in a pit in front of a tomb dromos;[10] its remains were not deposited in anatomical order, but the skeleton was complete. The skeleton of a puppy was buried in the dromos in front of the entrance to the same tomb.[11]

This kind of animal accompanying burial was found for the first time on Tell Arbid and until now has not been attested either earlier or later in time. The equine burial custom had a long tradition in Mesopotamia, but it was much less frequently attested after the EBA (Zarins 1986; Wapnish 1997). To the author's knowledge, there were actually only four MBA examples known previously from

[8] Offerings served to sustain the deceased in the afterlife as can be concluded from Mesopotamian cuneiform texts concerning *kispum*, a funeral offering: Bayliss 1973: 116–167; Tsukimoto 1985. The Khabur basin is not featured in *kispum* texts from the first half of the 2nd millennium BC. They come, however, from Mari in Northern Mesopotamia; the content of these texts fits well the funeral context on Tell Arbid.

[9] Children occasionally accompanied adults, but were never the sole occupants of such tombs.

[10] It can be argued on archaeological grounds that it was connected with the tomb despite not adjoining the dromos directly.

[11] In a sector excavated by the Adam Mickiewicz University team in 2008–2010, an equid skull, probably of an ass, was found on top of a chamber grave with "diamond" roof; also an identical puppy burial was found in the dromos of one of chamber tombs from this sector (Koliński 2009 and personal communication).

[12] Equid and human burials come from Tell el-Seib in the Hamrin Basin (Hannoun 1984: 70–71), from Tell Ababra in the Haditha basin (Piesl-Trenkwalder 1981–1982: 252) and from Tell ed-Der in Northern Babylonia (four equid legs deposited in the dromos of chamber tomb T. 272, together with some pig and ox remains) (Gasche 1989: 53).

Mesopotamia;[12] one of the best parallels is a burial discovered at Tell Mozan in the Khabur basin, a site in the vicinity of Tell Arbid.[13] It has been suggested that in the first half of the 2nd millennium BC sacrifices of equids, donkeys in particular, could have had ritual significance in a West Semitic milieu (Stiebing 1971: 116; Finet 1993; Durand 1997: 443–444). The assumption is based not only on observation of MBA equine burials deposited ceremonially in sacred context, but also on several references in cuneiform sources. In letters from Mari and Tell al-Rimah, sacrifices of equids accompanied the conclusion of a treaty among Amorite tribes.[14] This is not a funerary context obviously, but it suggests the symbolic meaning of these animals. In one of the Mari letters a puppy is also mentioned beside a donkey sacrifice and it is stated that it "illustrates the existence of two kinds of ritual acts connected with concluding of a covenant".[15]

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Social differentiation reflected in Tell Arbid mortuary practices was based on kin affiliation, hereditary position and age.

Kin affiliation seems to be the most characteristic feature of MBA burial customs. Graves were located *intra muros* and concentrated obviously in distinct, presumably "family" graveyards within the confines of a settled area. Also the practice of an ancestor cult underscores the existence of family ties.[16]

The fact that men were honored most often in this way indicates a patrilinear society, which is in keeping with Old Babylonian cuneiform sources.

The evidence for class division in the Tell Arbid mortuary assemblage was meager and no prestige elite was recognized. Neither were there extensive indications of differentiated material status. Standardized grave equipment pointed to the rather limited affluence of Arbid society as a whole. Nonetheless, the occurrence of symbolic objects in correlation with chamber tombs necessitating high energy expenditures for their construction indicated the special status of at least some of the buried individuals. This status could have translated from hereditary position as the distinction concerned adults of both sexes deposited in multiple burials, situated in the family graveyards in particular.

Burial rites seem also to have been differentiated by age. Infants received different burial, always in vessel containers. In case

[13] At Tell Mozan the equid, identified as a donkey, was interred in front of chamber tomb no. 37, see Dohmann-Pfälzner, Pfälzner 2001: 129–133.

[14] The Mari letters have produced the expression imêr hayari qatâlum "to slaughter a donkey", e.g., ANŠE ha-a-ri i ni-iq-tu-ul [nī]ši il ī ina birini i niškun "let us kill donkey foals (and thus) make a mutual sworn agreement (OBT Tell Rimah 1:11, after CAD, qatālu: 162); hâram ša salīm qatul "slaughter the foal of peace!" (Dossin 1938: 108–109, after CAD, hāru: 118); [h]āram mār atanim [a]nāku ūšāqtil salīmam birīt Hanê u Idamaras aškun "I made (them) slaughter a foal of a donkey mare and arranged (this) for peace between Hanu and Idamaras" (in ARM 2 37:12, CAD, qatālu: 162). The term is interpreted as a symbolic act accompanying the making of a treaty; it is of West Semitic origin and occurred most often in connection with Amorite tribes, Dossin 1938: 108–109.

[15] In ARM 2 37:10, before a donkey sacrifice between Bedouin Hananeans and Ida Maras people was concluded, representatives of the tribes proposed to sacrifice a puppy (sic!) and *hassu* (which is translated as a "goat" [Finet 1993] or a "leafy bough" [CAD]); their offer was rejected however by a royal official: me-ra-na-am ù ha-as-sà-am iššûnimma bēlī aplahama me-ra-na-am ù ha-as-sà-am ul addin: CAD, "H": 128.

[16] According to F. McHugh (1999: 43), family ties could be reinforced through referral to common ancestors.

of the most laborious form of grave, the vaulted chamber tomb, it seems to have been reserved for adults; there was never an infant found in any of tombs from this category. Members of all age groups were buried *intra muros* and no deviations from this rule was noted for any of the age groups.

The examination of MBA mortuary practices from Tell Arbid reveals a changing social structure and a new mode of life of the population compared to the previous period. The transformation could have been due to a general change of environmental conditions, but the possibility of a new ethnic element being introduced has also been suggested. Undeniable ethnic affiliation of specific mortuary customs has been rejected (Ucko 1969: 262–290), but it is tempting to think that the nomadic Amorites had finally settled in the region. The presence of ancient Ida Maras tribes has been indicated in letters from Mari (Durand 1997: 49–51) and the same cuneiform sources have associated the ritual of equid sacrifice with West Semitic tribes. An equid offering has been attested on Tell Arbid, although in a funerary context. On the other hand, it is known that a mixed population made up of people of Amoritic, Akkadian and Hurrian origin inhabited some neighboring Khabur-Ware period sites which have produced evidence of similar burial customs (but no equine burials), e.g. Chagar Bazar (Gadd 1940: 34). Thus, our hypothesis on Amoritic settlement on Tell Arbid remains only one of the possible but not obvious interpretations.

II. CULTURAL INTERRELATIONS WITH THE EASTERN NILE DELTA AND THE LEVANT

Equine burials are among mortuary behavior practices that could be traced in the MBA in the eastern Nile Delta and on some Levantine sites. They are considered here as a point of special interest. The best archaeological analogy for the Tell Arbid and Tell Mozan finds comes from the eastern Nile Delta, from sites with proven settlement of West Asiatic origin (so-called "Hyksos settlement") during the reign of the Thirteenth through Seventeenth Dynasties in Egypt (Bietak 1979: 225–290, Forstner-Müller 2002: 172). In Tell el-Daba'a, numerous equine burials[17] were found in funeral as well as cultic context in stratum F dated to the very end of the MB IIA period[18] (Forstner-Müller 2002: 163). In funeral context, equids were most often buried in pairs, sometimes individually, in dromoi leading to chambers, or more rarely, in separate pits situated east of the chamber tombs. The manner of construction of the vaulted chambers was similar to that recorded in tombs from the Khabur Basin (Bietak 1991: Pl. 13; Forstner-Müller 2002: Figs 6, 7, 8b; Schiestl 2002: Fig. 14). Single equine burials from the period are known also from other sites in the eastern Delta, from Tell el-Maskhuta (Van der Brink 1982: 58), Tell el-Farasha (Lawson Younger 2000: 620) and Inshas (Wapnish 1997:354). Van der Brink explains it as

[17] Bones of two dogs mixed with gazelle remains were also attested, but the contexts of the find was not primary and its connection with human burial is unsure (Schiestl 2002: 346).

[18] MB IIA for Levant and Egypt: 2000–1800/1750 BC according to Mazar 1990: 175.

a trait of West Asiatic occupation of that period (Van der Brink 1982: 55–61). According to Wapnisch, however, they originated from the same tradition as was practiced in graves of the Old Kingdom Tarkhan or Buhan, where animals were deposited as grave goods representing personal property (Wapnish 1997: 358, 360). Nevertheless, after the Old Kindgom the practice was abandoned.

Other elements of mortuary behavior beside equine burials seem also to be strikingly similar to the findings from some Khabur Basin MBA sites. They include a similar assemblage of grave types (Van der Brink 1982: 19–27, Forstner-Müller 2002: 169–171), a specific form of organization of burial area within a site,[19] the occurrence of multiple burials and a demographic cross-section observed in the intramural cemeteries (Van der Brink 1982: 227–239, Forstner-Müller 2002: 172, Schiestl 2002: 329–332).

MBA interment forms in the southern Levant were different from those observed in the Khabur Basin or the eastern Nile Delta due to natural conditions,[20] but equine burials from MBA have been attested. They were found in a grave context at Tell ʻAjjul, Jericho and Tell Duweir; equine burials appeared also at Tell Jemmeh in unclear context and at Tell Haror in association with a temple complex (Wapnish 1997).

Finds from Tell el-ʻAjjul (Petrie 1931: 4–6, Pls VIII, IX, XLVI, LVII, LX; 1933: 5; 1934: 15, Pl. LXVIII) and a single find from Tell Duweir (Tufnell 1958: 280) came from burial caves with niches (*loculi*) that, according to Gonen, where foreign to the local burial tradition (Gonen 1992: 24-26). The equid remains were buried in shafts or chambers with *loculi*. Other Levantine finds come from Jericho (Kenyon 1965: 206–226, 242–260).

At all three sites there were parts of the buried animal missing; at Tell-el'Ajjul, in one grave, an animal with only one foreleg was found; in some others, only skulls were present; similarly in Jericho, just the skull and forelegs were buried, and a sole skull was found in the grave at Tell Duweir (Stiebing 1971: 115). This points to some ceremony taking place and it could have been a ritual feast (Mackay, Murray 1952: 33; Stiebing 1971: 115). The chronology of South-Levantine equine burials ranges from MB IIA to MB IIC (most often) or late LB I,[21] making them contemporary or slightly later than those from the Khabur Basin and the Delta (Stiebing 1971: 115, Gonen 1992: 131, Wapnish 1997: 349–353).

CONCLUSION

New burial customs appeared in the Middle Bronze Age on Tell Arbid as well as on some neighboring Upper Khabur Basin sites. These new practices encompassed

[19] In Tell el-Daba'a tombs were located in proximity to the settlement. Separate family cemeteries were attested; some graves were situated near places of prestige. It should be said, however, that some changes in spatial relationship occurred during successive phases of occupation (Van der Brink 1982: 1–19, 61, Forstner-Müller 2002: 163, Schiestl 2002: 329–330).

[20] Hallote distinguishes two major types: constructed tombs and cut tombs, both with several sub-categories; most of them were made of or cut in rock (Hallote 1995: 96–102).

[21] MB IIB–C: 1800/1750–1550 BC, LB I: 1550–1400 BC according to Mazar 1990: 191.

intramural burials of the deceased from all age groups, a diversification of grave types, the introduction of barrel-vaulted chamber tombs, uniformity of grave equipment and reintroduction after the EBA of equine burials as a custom. These new mortuary rites can be described as enhancing family or clan ties within a patrilinear society; their introduction at the beginning of the second millennium BC reflected social and perhaps ethnic transformation. Some references in cuneiform texts and the practice of equine interments suggest that these new aspects of mortuary habits could have been associated with the Amoritic milieu and reflected progressing sedentarization of West Semitic tribes. Parallel mortuary practices, appearance of equine burials in particular, were observed in the eastern Nile Delta and in the southern Levant, where they also have been interpreted as symptomatic of West Asiatic occupation.

Adoption of the custom of equine burials during this period seems to reflect the prominent role of the animals, donkeys in particular, in the economy on the western fringes of the Ancient Near East in the MBA (Finet 1993: 136). The animals were so important in the everyday life of the inhabitants of the region that they could have become symbols of high status and penetrated into funeral rituals. But it seems that the process took place in particularly conducive circumstances. Despite some differences, the equine burials of the MBA shared enough similarities to make it probable that they derived from a common tradition. They were attested in a kin-oriented burial rite, where multiple adult interments were frequent, but attributes of power or wealth were not obligatory. They could have reflected commonly accepted mortuary ideology and established a comprehensible status mark of family authority. Finally, they appeared not earlier than in the later, advanced phase of the MBA and it seems that their revival after the EBA was convergent with a period of political domination of the West Semitic population in the Near East, as well as in the Nile Delta.

There are, however several elements that do not fit the conception of introducing burial changes by the West Semites. Arguments against such an interpretation include cuneiform references to the mixed ethnic composition of the Khabur Basin population and the not always homogenous picture of mortuary behavior from the North Mesopotamian area with attested West Semitic presence; equine burials are missing from regions like the Middle Euphrates, where the presence of nomadic Amorites has been attested textually. Moreover, there is also no evidence of the ritual importance of equids from the entire Levant, even though equids had to be important in this region and its MBA society as reflected in mortuary practices does not appear to stray from the picture developed for the area under consideration as, for example, in Tel Dan (Ilan 1995).

Thus, the question whether the described mortuary practices can be interpreted on all sites as a symptom of actual West Semitic presence must remain open and, perhaps, unanswerable. It is not unwarranted, however, to assume that their introduction had, at least in the beginning, an ethnic affiliation. The spread of mortuary practices associated with West Semitic nomads could have been prompted by certain specific circumstances, i.e., similar mode of subsistence, similar social organization and shared environmental conditions. Confirming the hypothesis are

equine interments as well as other common MBA features of burial customs which declined at most sites during the later phases of LBA, following the socio-political and economic changes that occurred at this time in the entire Near East.

Dr. Zuzanna Wygnańska
Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw
00-497 Warsaw, Poland
ul. Nowy Świat 4
e-mail: wygnanska@tlen.pl

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